

## CHAPTER 6

### *The price of monotheism: some new observations on a current debate about late antiquity*

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#### RECENT DEBATE AND THE SILENCE OF HISTORIANS

My title refers to *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus*, the most prominent of Jan Assmann's publications, which have been at the centre of a debate about monotheism among contemporary theologians.<sup>1</sup> Assmann proposed a structural division between primary and secondary forms of religion which broadly conforms to the divide between polytheism and monotheism. The decisive factor in the emergence of secondary religious forms was not the decision to honour one rather than many gods, but to distinguish true from false doctrine. The choice of truth necessarily entailed the rejection of falsehood; thus the secondary religion was exclusive, not inclusive, and intolerant of error and religious deviation. The price for the identification and pursuit of religious truth was paid in hostility to and the repression of false gods, heresy and religious ideas that deviated from the true religion. Violence and hatred were therefore inevitable partners of secondary, monotheistic, religion. It is likely that widespread discussions of Assmann's thesis will continue, not without inevitable repetition of the ensuing arguments. This paper does not intend to side with Assmann's critics and praise monotheism for its integrative and peaceful characteristics, nor will it defend his views with new or old arguments. Rather, my reflections proceed from the comment recently made by a historian: 'the screaming muteness of the historians and scholars of the social sciences'.<sup>2</sup>

As an introduction I begin by asking a question that makes the historical and social dimension of the problem immediately apparent: if this is a discussion about monotheism, whose views are the subject of the debate? Or,

<sup>1</sup> Assmann (2003); cf. also Assmann (1999) and (2000), 62–80. This paper was prepared for the Religionswissenschaftliche Sozietät in the Forschungsstätte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft e.V. (FEST) on 19 January 2004. Only the footnotes have been slightly augmented. I would like to thank Andreas Heiser for his assistance with the completion of the manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Weichlein (2003).

to put it more clearly, who actually is a protagonist of the monotheism and the history of ideas that Jan Assmann has reconstructed, thereby initiating this heated discussion? What meaning does the concept of 'monotheism' have when it is considered on the level of 'religion as practised'? The collection of essays *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, edited by Assmann, contains a number of relevant critical statements. The remarks of Klaus Koch, Egyptologist and expert in the area of Old Testament studies, on the 'multifarious overlapping of poly- and monotheism' also seem to focus on the question I have raised, that is the question of religion as practised in concrete historical situations and social contexts. But he is also concerned with intellectual history, or the history of ideas, which he assigns to political, economical and social factors, and it comes as something of a surprise against this background when he suggests that Assmann's pursuit of a history of ideas is founded on thin air, in his words: 'Ideengeschichte gleichsam ohne Bodenhaftung'.<sup>3</sup> However, he himself is not far removed from this spectre, which looms over all recent historians and sociologists.

Of course Assmann is right first to reconstruct monotheism as a theoretical concept. But who would seriously consider that history is guided by ideas which are theoretical constructs in the first instance and are only represented in reality by the activities of a minority? His position takes for granted that this is 'no argument against the thesis of a Mosaic distinction, which finds no support in the history of religion in the sense that a strict monotheism existed neither in ancient Israel nor in early Judaism'; it takes for granted that very few advocates of this 'intellectual point of view' suffice to impose it; and it takes for granted that a few 'monotheistic elements' in polytheistic or syncretistic practice fulfil the requirements.<sup>4</sup> But it must remain the privilege of the historian to ask why such ideas that stem from minorities become generally established, and why this was especially the case with pressure groups who were without political power. Furthermore, and not least, the historian must ask in what form these ideas, albeit generally in a moderated form, were concretely established.

#### THE CONCEPT OF MONOTHEISM IN THE RECENT DEBATE IN GERMANY

In order not to assume the seemingly positivistic superior position of the historian of religion and pursue the question in total hermeneutic naïvety,

<sup>3</sup> Koch (1999), reprinted in Assmann (2000), 234.

<sup>4</sup> Assmann (2003), 51 clarifies his thesis in this way.

it is, of course, necessary that I clarify a few points beforehand. With my introductory question of what is monotheism I am in fact searching for the monotheists. But what actually is monotheism? What concepts of monotheism have been assumed in the recent debate? Odo Marquard, in his somewhat mischievous and not totally serious pamphlet *Lob des Polytheismus*, linked monotheism with 'monomyth',<sup>5</sup> and formulated his well-known working hypothesis: 'the polymyth is digestible, the monomyth detrimental'.<sup>6</sup> The polymyth is fitted out with all kinds of notions which imply positive meanings. For example, leaving aside the culinary metaphor of 'digestibility', polymyth is also denoted as the more democratic form by reference to the key concept of 'division of power',<sup>7</sup> since it allows man to develop his individuality freely. The classical form of polymyth was polytheism, because many different fables were related within it,<sup>8</sup> while monotheism is the classical murderer of both polytheism and polymyth.

Comparably, Jan Assmann regards the decisive factor in monotheism not to be 'the differentiation between the one God and many gods . . .', but the distinction between 'the true God and the false gods', the so-called Mosaic distinction.<sup>9</sup> In his latest book this is explicitly linked with the 'Parmenidean distinction' between true and false knowledge. Assmann explains that both the followers of monotheism and those of Parmenides must be structurally intolerant towards a false god or false knowledge.<sup>10</sup> The 'enforcement of thought' in the Parmenidean distinction corresponds with the enforcing of belief in the Mosaic distinction, as Assmann put it in agreement with Werner Jaeger.<sup>11</sup> It becomes clear from this comparison that here, in the first place, strict theoretical consistency is involved.

Of course, the political vocabulary of enforcement and tolerance which dominates Marquard's and Assmann's terminology suggests swift conclusions about how theory may be put into practice in the religion and philosophy of everyday life. In another paper I somewhat impertinently ascribed the use of this political vocabulary in the context of polytheism and monotheism to a 'concerned old European democratic view', which

<sup>5</sup> Marquard (2000b), first published in 1981. Klaus Koch asserts rather disparagingly that the text gave the impression that the author was slightly inebriated whilst writing it.

<sup>6</sup> Marquard (2000b), 98. <sup>7</sup> Marquard (2000b), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Marquard reduces religion as well as myth to this simple formula: Marquard (2000b), 93 and 100.

<sup>9</sup> Assmann (2003), 12; Assmann (1998), 250. The first to advocate the Mosaic distinction, however, was not Moses, but the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, who formed the basis of his 'theoclasm' in opposition to traditional Egyptian pantheism.

<sup>10</sup> Assmann (2003), 23 and 26. <sup>11</sup> Assmann (2003), 24, in agreement with Jaeger (1934) I, 237.

might be expected from the Giessen philosopher and the Heidelberg historian of religion. Naturally, at the time I did not seek to deny that there are always new grounds for expressing this concerned democratic view, and that it is perhaps not detrimental that such a perspective does play a role within historical research.<sup>12</sup> The consequences of the chosen imagery come as no surprise. The fact that the 'monotheistically inspired writings of the Bible' represented the establishment of the worship of Yahwe, the one God, 'as violent, even as a direct result of a series of massacres' is a matter which is concerned with 'the cultural semantics and not the history of events', as Assmann himself proclaims.<sup>13</sup> It is another question, however, whether one can describe these passages of the Old Testament as the 'anticipation of Auschwitz'.<sup>14</sup>

Against this theoretical background of a current debate I would now like to ask if one can really speak of 'monomyth' and of a definite distinction between the true God and false gods in the different forms of monotheism that are actually believed in – Hebrew, pagan and Christian. Can one really say that in piety as practised 'translatability is blocked'<sup>15</sup> by the 'hermeneutics of difference' which were characteristic of the primary religions that existed before the 'monotheistic transformation', as formulated by Assmann? When Assmann claims that 'the religions always had a mutual basis. Therefore, they could function as a medium of intercultural translatability', were the features that characterised pre-monotheistic religions brutally destroyed?<sup>16</sup> Or, to put it in a different way, can we observe in these ancient forms of monotheistic piety what Odo Marquard sees as their inevitable implication, that is, the 'liquidation' of polymyth and polytheism?

I want to note explicitly that I do not want simply to join the mass of Assmann's critics, because in Assmann's most recent publication one can naturally also read that, as a matter of course, Christianity insisted on the 'universalisation of the Mosaic distinction', which 'no longer applies only for the Jews, but for all mankind'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, one can find a memorable analysis which already observed this universalisation in Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>18</sup> I essentially want to query once again the efficiency of the category of 'monotheism' as well as the duality of 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' as ways of comprehending the social and religious history of antiquity. I would call into question the efficiency of conceptual forms

<sup>12</sup> Marksches (2006). <sup>13</sup> Assmann (2004a), 37.

<sup>14</sup> Assmann (2000), 72. The passages referred to are Deut. 28. <sup>15</sup> Assmann (2003), 38.

<sup>16</sup> Assmann (2003), 19. <sup>17</sup> Assmann (2003), 30.

<sup>18</sup> Assmann (2003), 44–7 (on Wisd. of Sol. 14:23–7).

‘which stem from controversial theological debates of the 17th and 18th centuries and’ – as Jan Assmann now states with surprising clarity – ‘are totally unsuitable for the description of ancient religions’.<sup>19</sup>

One could attempt to answer the given questions using many examples stemming from the ancient history of religion, or analyse an endless number of texts written by Christian theologians of antiquity, or turn to the everyday Christian piety of the time, as well as Neoplatonic treatises or pagan magic papyri. But, in doing so, the extensive material of a yet-to-be-written monograph on the subject could only be presented in a very abbreviated form, and I will therefore concentrate on a single characteristic example of so-called ancient ‘monotheism’. Because I am currently working on a much expanded new publication of an inventory of the inscriptions from antiquity which contain the ‘one God’ (εἷς θεός) formula,<sup>20</sup> I will take this formulation and its history as a paradigm, which will help answer both my questions, about what monotheism was, and who the monotheists were, and likewise support my attempt to make certain basic observations on the terminology of ‘monotheism’ or rather ‘polytheism’.

#### OBSERVATIONS ON MONOTHEISM FROM LATE ANTIQUITY

Let us take a walk through a small village situated in the vicinity of Damascus in the province of Syria in the fifth century AD. The village is called El Dumeir or Hirbet Ed-Dumèr; its ancient name is unknown today. In antiquity this location would have much resembled the traditional, unchanged, small villages one finds today in the Hauran. The irregular unpaved streets that run through the village are lined, to a great extent, with windowless, one-storey, houses, built mostly of local basalt, sparingly divided into a few rooms, and with roofs made by spanning blocks of basalt supported by an arch or a central supporting column. Today one can still visit such houses, or rather their ruins, in the deserted villages of the Golan, occupied by the Israelis, and in the dead cities of North Jordan. Some have been used continually for almost 5,000 years, and the height of the floors and their low ceilings alone betray the fact that they have been lived in for such an extended period of time. The decoration of the buildings mostly comprises only an ornamented lintel over the door, often still preserved, or utilised in the vicinity for some other purpose. Walking through El Dumeir or Hirbet Ed-Dumèr we confront a basalt lintel and read the inscription εἷς ὁ θεὸς ὁ βοηθῶν, ‘one God who helps’. Two names are included on the

<sup>19</sup> Assmann (2003), 49.

<sup>20</sup> Peterson (1926).

lintel under these lines, which ask us to remember the two persons who commissioned the inscription and – as one can easily assume – also paid for the whole house. On closer scrutiny it is very soon apparent that the inscriptions are of Jewish origin,<sup>21</sup> and that the εἷς θεός, the ‘one God’, who is called upon here, is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that is, the God of Israel. Were a Jew of late antiquity to accompany us on our walk, it would have been immediately clear that the acclamation was naturally an abbreviated formula signifying Israel’s fundamental profession of faith, the deuteronomistic *Schēma Jisrael*, in the Greek form ἄκουε Ἰσραὴλ κύριος ὁ θεός ὑμῶν κύριος ἑστίν. However, the biblical reference, as well as the formulation on the lintel (‘one God who helps’), make it very clear that the existence of additional gods and divine powers was not denied. Rather, the fact that they also can be effective helpers and as such be addressed as ‘Lord’ at all was being contested. Analogously, knowledgeable specialists in the field interpret the intentions of many layers in the Old Testament as testifying to monotheism. However, if one is aware of these connections, which in my judgement can neither clearly be termed monotheistic nor polytheistic, and which scholars of religion accordingly categorise a little unfortunately as ‘monolatry’, then it is questionable if this Hebrew ‘monotheism’ is really appropriately described in Jan Assmann’s convenient formulation of the ‘Mosaic distinction’.

After these considerations we continue our walk through the village and come to realise that, if the archaeological evidence does not deceive, this is the only inscription of its kind to be found. We have encountered the inscription εἷς ὁ θεός ὁ βοηθῶν, ‘the one God who helps’, written over the entrance of this single Jewish house in the village. We pause for a moment and sit on one of the stones which line a small garden in the village centre, and try to interpret this discovery. It is obvious that the formula εἷς ὁ θεός ὁ βοηθῶν served to signify the identity of the two Jewish owners of the house, to differentiate them from the other dwellings, which were probably Christian and pagan. A Jewish fellow believer passing through the village in late antiquity would have known immediately whom he could turn to, where he could expect to be offered hospitality, and where not.

We continue our journey through Syria in late antiquity and travel roughly 250 kilometres from El Dumeir or Hirbet Ed-Dumèr, passing through Damascus and Apameia, to the middle of the Syrian Limestone

<sup>21</sup> Brünnow and Domaszewski (1909), no. 37. J.-B. Frey, *CIF* II, 89–90, no. 848 interprets the text as a Jewish inscription and corrects Peterson’s readings again according to Brünnow; compare also Schwabe (1951) and the new edition by D. Noy and H. Bloedhorn, *IJO* III (Syria and Cyprus), 63–5 Syr41.

Massif in the north-west of the province. On the high plateau of the Gebel Barîha, we arrive at a somewhat larger ancient village named Dâr Qita. This village, 25 kilometres south of the famous church of St Simeon Stylites, is now forsaken and in ruins. It was a commercial centre on the high plateau massif, from which olive oil and wine, the products grown and produced by the landowners of the small and large estates of the area, were formerly transported to the coast. Because we are interested in the subject of monotheism, we will ignore the three basilicas of the village and again study only the lintels over the entrances of the houses, which are mostly larger complexes with residential buildings and stables surrounded by walls, and sometimes also by shops and stores or small hostels. In doing so, we make some remarkable discoveries. For, if we have correctly counted and carefully studied each lintel that has been preserved over the years, thirteen inscriptions prominently display the familiar formula εἷς θεός, 'one God'. Strangely enough, these inscriptions all appear to be exclusively Christian: for example, one text dating back to AD 431 reads εἷς θεός καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα.<sup>22</sup> However, we also encounter varied forms of our customary formula from El Dumeir or Hirbet Ed-Dumèr: εἷς θεὸς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς βοήθισον τοῦ κόσμου; this inscription may date to AD 515/16.<sup>23</sup> Oddly enough, not only the formula with Christ's name appears on Christian houses, but also the simple and very familiar εἷς ὁ θεὸς ὁ βοηθῶν combined with the names of those who commissioned the inscriptions.<sup>24</sup> A comprehensive study has shown that inscriptions including the formula εἷς θεός were used especially by newly converted Christians and hence serve as an index of the gradual Christianisation of the North Syrian Limestone Massif in late antiquity.<sup>25</sup> Thus the formula reading εἷς θεός in Dâr Qita and other villages in the Limestone Massif served exactly the same purpose as it did in El Dumeir or Hirbet Ed-Dumèr near Damascus. It marked out certain houses of a village by a sort of 'house sign' in the very same way that one still finds the houses of Christians today, indicated by a plaque depicting St George, and the houses of Moslems, using a vignette displaying the Jerusalem Dome of the Rock. Our South Syrian and North Syrian examples differ only in that in the former case the house of a Jew was made to stand out amongst the Christian residences, and in the latter thirteen houses of Christians were singled out from an incomparably larger number of households inhabited

<sup>22</sup> *IGLS* II, 536.    <sup>23</sup> *IGLS* II, 537.    <sup>24</sup> *IGLS* II, 543 or 544: ὁ βοηθῶν ἡμᾶς.

<sup>25</sup> Trombley (1993–4) II, 260.

by people of pagan belief.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, there was no brutal 'liquidation' of polytheistic piety by monotheism, as formulated by Odo Marquard, in Dâr Qita, because the worshippers of gods, whose ability to provide help was doubted by both Christians and Jews alike, were still physically present in the neighbourhood, and they could, by ancient standards, still provide palpable experience of their own divine reality.

But we have not fully exhausted the possibilities of the formula εἰς θεός with these examples. One can find even more evidence for the said connection than has been found in the individual villages of the North Syrian Limestone Massif by investigating a single village in the Holy Land, which has been revealed through the large archaeological excavation of the Church of Mary Theotokos on Mount Gerizim above Nablus/Shechem. This excavation has been carried out for a number of years on the peak of the holy mountain of the Samaritans by the Department of Antiquities for Judea and Samaria, following work commissioned by the Görresgesellschaft that was begun by German archaeologists in the 1930s.<sup>27</sup> A single εἰς θεός inscription was published then, but it was not possible to estimate the real extent of the finds until recent years. An Israeli epigrapher has not only published three further εἰς θεός inscriptions in recent years, but also verbally confirmed the observation of every attentive visitor of the excavations, that one positively stumbles over εἰς θεός inscriptions, especially in the fortress-like buildings which encompass the Church of Mary Theotokos. Even though we still await the final publication of these inscriptions – one can estimate about seventy examples – we have here by far the greatest number of texts containing this formula found in a single location. In general the inscriptions are to be found on floor slabs of single rooms and in the central ambulatory outside the church. On closer scrutiny, it is evident that they are not texts that originally belonged to the still highly impressive Christian church building dating back to late antiquity, but are elements from a Samaritan sacred building, constructed during imperial times on Mount Gerizim and razed to the ground in AD 484 by order of the Byzantine emperor.

At this point I could – perhaps in the style of a travel journal – produce further examples of the use of the εἰς θεός formula, which have been

<sup>26</sup> Trombley (1993–4) II, 313–15, esp. 313 ('Appendix v: The "One God" inscriptions'): 'There can be little doubt that the Christian use of the "One God" formula in the inscription of the Limestone Massif and elsewhere is to be understood as a statement of monotheistic belief vis à vis the villagers' abandonment of polytheism'. Trombley counters the position argued by Jarry (1988).

<sup>27</sup> Schneider (1949/51), esp. 228, 230–1 with Plate 9; reprinted in Schneider (1998), esp. 200, 202; cf. also Di Segni (1990).



unearthed in Israel/Palestine especially in connection with Samaritan synagogues.<sup>28</sup> By doing so, I would reveal that the monotheistic acclamation εἷς θεός also served the Samaritans as a characteristic way of representing their specific identity, which differentiated them from other Jewish, Christian and pagan centres of cult worship in Palestine and in Nablus/Shechem. The invocation 'one God' therefore fulfilled precisely the function that it had at other locations in Syria for those very groups from which the Samaritans had sought to distance themselves for centuries.

My observations on the εἷς θεός inscriptions can be rounded off by a reference to the example of milestones in Palestine, which were erected in AD 361/2 under the rule of the Emperor Julian and which, as they bear the inscription of εἷς θεὸς νίκᾳ Ἰουλιανῆ, must also be counted as evidence of the fact that the apostate used precisely the εἷς θεός formula of the Christians as a form of propaganda against their religion.<sup>29</sup> Or I could point out a carved gemstone found in Egypt, which introduces an obviously pagan oracle with the words εἷς θεὸς λέγει.<sup>30</sup> However, it is not necessary to continue in detail as these examples are more than sufficient to answer both our questions, and lead us to a few final remarks on the usefulness of the category 'monotheism' and the dual terms 'monotheism' – 'polytheism' for a history of religion in antiquity.

#### THE USEFULNESS OF MONOTHEISM FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGION

We have seen in our examples that at least everyday Jewish 'monotheism' in the South Syrian village of El Dumeir or Hirbet Ed-Dumèr, that of the Christians in Dâr Qita, and that of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim near Nablus, served the purpose which Odo Marquard contested. It stabilised the individual identity of another distinctive religion within a continuing polytheistic–polymythical environment. We were unable to observe any sign of the tendency towards the intellectual or physical liquidation of polytheistic religions related to professing a monotheistic faith in one god who helps. Rather, the opposite tendency seemed to prevail. The inhabitants in the above-mentioned villages lived peacefully side by side, even after the 'Constantinian transformation'. One can hardly speak of 'liquidation', but at most discern that a certain religious group pointedly professed faith in one single helper, displaying a tendency to emasculate, subordinate and sublimate the gods worshipped by neighbours.

<sup>28</sup> Di Segni (1998), 55.

<sup>29</sup> Di Segni (1994), 104, no. 31; cf. *SEG* 41 (1991), 1544.

<sup>30</sup> Nock (1940), 313.

Correspondingly, the memorable formulation of the 'Mosaic distinction' coined by Jan Assmann does not in reality correspond to the contemporary circumstances. On the contrary, it is exactly the aspect which Assmann holds to be typical for polytheism, its ability to synthesise foreign gods within its own system of myths, which in fact characterises how Jews, Christians and Samaritans dealt with the gods of their pagan neighbours. They were regarded as ultimately helpless and weak divine powers, simply as demons, but their existence was by no means liquidated. What is more, Jews, Christians and Samaritans would of course have differentiated themselves more pointedly and perhaps more exactly than in pagan polytheism, but did every Thessalian farmer really worship all the gods of the Greek pantheon? Did a simple citizen who farmed land in the vicinity really visit Artemis one morning, Apollo of Claros the next, and go to the temple of the deified emperor Hadrian the day after? Does not the alleged clear-cut differentiation between 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' become more blurred as we adjust the optics and view the situation more precisely? On closer observation were not polytheists as well as monotheists sometimes violent and sometimes peaceable? Do not other factors, such as the political and economic circumstances of the times, play a much more decisive role when trying to explain the reasons behind the liquidation and rise of religions? As for the headword 'monolatry', the worship of only one god, while it still acknowledges the existence of other gods and demonic beings, are not all cats grey anyway?

The exemplary finds in the Near East of late antiquity should warn us not to overestimate the efficiency of the category 'monotheism' and its counterpart 'polytheism'. These paired terms have been in use since the seventeenth century, but since then have yet to play a dominant role in religious and theological history. It was probably Friedrich Schleiermacher in the introduction to the second edition of the *Glaubenslehre* (1830–1) who initially moulded the notion and matter of 'monotheism'<sup>31</sup> into a characteristic that identified Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>32</sup> Incidentally, this explains his very critical position in relation to the Church's teachings on the Trinity, in which he detects the 'unconscious echo of the heathen'. Put in less genteel wording, the remaining stock of polytheism required 'new treatment' and 'remodelling', and this was to be found embryonically in

<sup>31</sup> Cf. two more recent definitions: Bloch (2000), 375: 'Glauben an die Existenz eines einzigen Gottes im Gegensatz zu Polytheismus und Henotheismus'; Schwöbel (1994), 257: "Monotheismus" bezeichnet im allgemeinen eine Interpretation des Göttlichen, die dieses als wesentlich eine, einzig und einheitliche, in genauer zu bestimmendem Sinn personhafte . . . Wirklichkeit darstellt, die auf das welthafte Seiende als deren Grund und Ziel bezogen ist.'

<sup>32</sup> Schleiermacher (1960), §8. It displayed, however, varying degrees in Judaism and Islam; cf. the observations made by Schwöbel (1994), 257.

the theology of the Trinity.<sup>33</sup> This view converges in a sense with that of Odo Marquard. So, if one critically reconsiders the function and efficiency of the dual terms 'monotheism' – 'polytheism',<sup>34</sup> the results would be in no way as crucial for reconstructing the history of religion in antiquity as has been concluded by certain researchers, even by whole generations of researchers, who have eagerly sought out evidence for polytheism as practised by monotheists in late antiquity.

The evidence of inscriptions found among ordinary Christians indicates that the confined limits of a clearly defined concept of monotheism, to which excessive attention has been paid in the widely inculcated tradition introduced by Schleiermacher, did not exist in late antiquity. The overall picture in later antiquity was varied and colourful. We may recall the problematical role played by the angels in monotheistic religions.<sup>35</sup> As early as the nineteenth century some scholars of religion believed that the intensive worship of angels in Judaism weakened monotheism and thereby, so to speak, provided suitable conditions for the Christian theology of the Trinity.<sup>36</sup> This view has also, of course, been strongly refuted since.<sup>37</sup> Inscriptions in particular reveal how popular the worship of angels was in the everyday life of ancient times amongst Jews and Christians alike,<sup>38</sup> but one could also demonstrate the commonplace 'polytheism' of the 'monotheists' by citing the many magic texts which were used by the Jews, Christians and Samaritans of antiquity as a matter of course. I will abstain from citing further evidence for the 'routine polytheism' of many ancient 'monotheists', because here too our examples are already enough to illustrate the basic thesis.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, theoretical reflection in the time of the Roman Empire was often not at all concerned with our modern questions about the singularity of God in opposition to 'polytheism', but, as many Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic texts suggest,<sup>40</sup> with the simpler question of what stands at the beginning of all things, a single principle, a final reason, or even a dualistic principle. The function of the dual categories of 'monotheism' – 'polytheism' should be reviewed, not

<sup>33</sup> Schleiermacher (1960), §172.

<sup>34</sup> According to Julian, *Contra Galilaeos* 72.20–1 cited by Cyril of Alexandria, *In Julianum* 9.306B, the question concerning monotheism and polytheism is 'a trivial matter'.

<sup>35</sup> Corbin (1981). <sup>36</sup> Bousset (1926), 302–57; see, most recently, Koch (1994).

<sup>37</sup> Hurtado (2003), 24–7 and also 41: 'The "weakened monotheism" of post-biblical Judaism described by Bousset and others is an erroneous construct'; Hayman (1991).

<sup>38</sup> Leclercq (1924), 2144–53. <sup>39</sup> For Egypt see Vinzent (1998), 43–6.

<sup>40</sup> For example, cf. the following passage from the sixth century: Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Gorgiam* 4.3 (p. 32.16–17 Westerink): καὶ γὰρ ἴσμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν τῷ πρῶτον αἰτίῳ τὸν θεὸν οὐδὲ γὰρ πολλὰ πρῶτα ('And we also know that the first cause of all things is one and that it is God. Therefore there cannot be many first causes').

only because they are relatively recent coinages, but also because of their limited explanatory power. This applies by no means only to the social history of religion, but also particularly to the history of religion and ideas in general.

My examples have shown that basing our understanding of the relationship between 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' as corresponding to a conflict between an open and a totalitarian society misses the truth at least in the case of the historical circumstances of antiquity. One may assume that the case was similar in the earlier eras of Israeli and Jewish religious history. I have also voiced considerable doubts about the efficiency of the terms 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' within history and religious studies. This result leads us to a final question. How could one construct such clearly demarcated patterns for religions?

It is my belief that imposition of such terminology, which fits the historical truth only under very limited conditions, is linked with the very one-sided orientation to be found in many studies of religious history which – to put it succinctly – impose a bias towards intellectual history. This is also the case with many works written by theologians and ecclesiastical historians, who approach the subject matter from the viewpoint of dogmatic and theological history. The sensitive subject of 'monotheism' – 'polytheism' is treated purely in the context of a certain social class of ancient society, against the background of views held by erudite teachers and highly educated cultic functionaries. The historical picture that is conveyed remains correspondingly tendentious.

Jan Assmann's extremely erudite monograph displays a similar bias, not so much in representing the history of ancient mentality, as implied by the subtitle, but rather in presenting a prehistory of a previous European mentality, and thus demonstrating the impressive self-enlightenment of a member of the German professorial class concerning the light and dark sides of his identification as a German and European academic. From this viewpoint, all the above-mentioned patterns are particularly relevant to intellectual history and to a mentality which is not to be underestimated, even though we have vehemently disputed their relevance for approaching the history of ancient religion. They are relevant in the present day, when, for example, the construction of clearly differentiated 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' is used to enlist support for religious and political tolerance and to preserve the basic principles of democracy based on the rule of law. It would not at all become a theologian to contradict such an argument.

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